DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 125 SP 039 637

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TITLE Beyond "An Experiment with a Project Curriculum": The Other Works of Ellsworth Collings.
PUB DATE 2000-10-07
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Teaching and Curriculum (7th, Alexandria, VA, October 5-7, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Development; *Educational Improvement; Higher Education; Progressive Education; Public Education; *Rural Schools; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Collings (Ellsworth)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the works of Ellsworth Collings, professor at the University of Oklahoma beginning in 1922 and Dean of the School of Education beginning in 1926. Educators remember Collings for his 1923 book, "An Experiment With a Project Curriculum," which described the effectiveness of certain progressive principles when employed in rural schools. However, Collings wrote many other works that remain largely forgotten and ignored. No complete bibliography exists, and his papers have not been preserved. Collings published at least six books on education. His articles, which appeared in many well-known and lesser-known journals, primarily addressed project teaching as a means of improving education for all students. Throughout his articles, there was a steadfast faith in the engagement of students in purposeful activities, a belief in the dignity of children and the respect they deserved, and a hope that schools could be improved for all students. These themes were also present in his books. Collings' books regularly addressed the mechanics of implementing the ideas he advocated in classrooms and schools. He discussed methods of curriculum development, classroom instruction, and student evaluation. He offered specific examples of how some teachers had engaged their own students in various projects. (SM)

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American Association for Teaching and Curriculum
Seventh Annual Conference
October 5 - 7, 2000
Alexandria, Virginia

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Beyond *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum:*

The Other Works of Ellsworth Collings

"Your offer as professor of Education in the University accepted."[1] With that ten-word telegram sent on the evening of June 17, 1922, to President Stratton D. Brooks of the University of Oklahoma, Ellsworth Collings began a 36-year career in higher education at his only institutional home. Collings likely found the opportunity for an academic appointment in Oklahoma, adjacent to his native Missouri and in his beloved west, a stroke of good fortune. Nevertheless, the University of Oklahoma surely must have seemed to be a scholarly backwater to the new faculty member, fresh from Teachers College and study under William Heard Kilpatrick, who described Collings as "one of the best known men for his age and experience in educational circles."[2]

Collings apparently adapted well to the University of Oklahoma. He received tenure effective July 1, 1923.[3] Collings also began teaching summer school during that first summer following his initial appointment at the University and became Director of the Summer School in 1926.[4] Collings's interest in summer school undoubtedly arose from his own experiences as a teacher and administrator in rural and small schools in Missouri. In addition to the small stipend summer teaching provided, he also had the opportunity to work with educators whose backgrounds likely were similar to his own.

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[1] Telegram from Ellsworth Collings to Stratton D. Brooks, June 17, 1922, Ellsworth Collings Personnel File, Office of the Provost, University of Oklahoma (henceforth referred to as ECPF).
[2] Letter from Wm. H. Kilpatrick to W. B. Bizzell, May 22, 1926, ECPF.
[3] Letter from President to Collings, March 13, 1923, ECPF.
[4] Letter from President to Collings, March 13, 1923, ECPF; letter from W. B. Bizzell to Collings, May 25, 1926, ECPF.

Collings continued to teach during summer sessions throughout his years on the faculty at the University of Oklahoma.[5]

The year 1926 was momentous for Ellsworth Collings as he also assumed another, more significant leadership position at the University of Oklahoma. On September 23, 1926, the Board of Regents appointed him Dean of the School of Education, effective retroactive to September 1, 1926.[6] Collings held that position until his resignation, effective October 1, 1945. During his tenure as dean, the School of Education grew into the College of Education and the difficulties of the Great Depression passed only to be replaced by the challenges of World War II. Upon his resignation as dean, Collings was appointed Dean Emeritus and Professor of School Supervision.[7]

Ellsworth Collings retired from the University of Oklahoma at the conclusion of the spring 1958 semester. University President George L. Cross wrote to him:

> The file you have been accumulating in this office since you joined the faculty in 1922, while it only suggests an outline of your career, is an impressive one. Your splendid record of achievement as teacher and as administrator is an enviable one, especially in its indication of fine relations with your students and colleagues.[8]

Collings resided during his remaining years on his ranch near Davis in southern Oklahoma and died on June 18, 1970.[9]

Prior to his lengthy career at the University of Oklahoma, Ellsworth Collings lived what surely must have been the early 20th century educator's version of the "American dream." Born in McDonald County, Missouri, on October 23, 1887, Collings earned both his B.S. in Education and A.M. in Educational Psychology degrees from the

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[5] Various letters of appointment, ECPF.
[6] Letter from W. B. Bizzell to Collings, September 24, 1926, ECPF.
[7] Office Memorandum from Roscoe Cates to Mr. Kraettli, August 13, 1945, ECPF.
[8] Letter from George L. Cross to Collings, June 12, 1958, ECPF.

University of Missouri. He began his teaching career in a one-room school in his home county during the 1908-1909 academic year. A series of administrative posts in various Missouri schools and districts followed.[10] Collings's humble beginnings in rural Missouri ultimately led him in 1919 to the then pinnacle of the education profession in the United States, Teachers College. There, he completed his dissertation under the supervision of William Heard Kilpatrick, who wrote of Collings to the University of Oklahoma President in 1926:

> When he studied here he did much of his work under me and I came to know him very well. I need not recall to you his ability, earnestness, or trustworthiness. These qualities he has, I am sure, made evident in his work in your institution. The point that I would urge is that Professor Collings in my judgment . . . has . . . an almost missionary zeal for service to others in educational work. From this point of view I should expect him to take very great interest in educational work of the state and help to extend the influence of the University throughout the state.[11]

Kilpatrick's high assessment of Collings is based largely on Collings's work at Teachers College. Collings, unlike most other graduate students, transformed his dissertation into a well-known and widely distributed book.

Today, Ellsworth Collings tends to be remembered by educators, if at all, for that dissertation turned book, *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*, published in 1923. This volume reported on the effectiveness of certain progressive principles when employed in rural schools. Collings purportedly conducted experiments leading to the dissertation and book while serving as a Missouri county superintendent of schools. Although a recent investigation raised substantive doubts regarding some of Collings's methodologies, claims, and results, that study itself, perhaps unintentionally,

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[9] "Death Claims Dr. Collings," *The Norman Transcript*, June 19, 1970, pp. 1, 4.
[10] Application for Position, September 21, 1922, ECPF.
[11] Letter from Wm. H. Kilpatrick to W. B. Bizzell, May 22, 1926, ECPF.

demonstrated the very significance of *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*. Over seventy years after publication, the book was still deemed to be of such stature and significance as to merit a careful, detailed reconsideration.[12]

Any perceived irregularities in Collings's dissertation cannot be understood fully without a consideration of the context of the dissertation process at Teachers College during the early 20th century. Raymond E. Callahan, for example, pointed out the recurring triviality of topics for dissertations in educational administration accepted between 1914 and 1930.[13] Somewhat later, in 1938, Marion Ostrander, later to become Kilpatrick's third wife, gained approval of her 100-page dissertation devoid of any reference citations. She merely included a bibliography.[14] Clearly, what constituted an acceptable dissertation during the period of Collings's study at Teachers College would not consistently fulfill contemporary expectations for dissertations. Nevertheless, Collings, unlike the majority of Teachers College graduates, parlayed his dissertation into a major book with a worldwide readership.[15]

The other written works of Ellsworth Collings, however, remain largely forgotten and ignored. In fact, no complete bibliography exists and his papers appear not to have been preserved.[16] Reconstructing his bibliography from available surviving resources

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[12] Michael Knoll, "Faking a Dissertation: Ellsworth Collings, William H. Kilpatrick, and the 'Project Curriculum,'" *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 28 (March-April1996): 193-222.

[13] Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 187-188.

[14] John A. Beineke, *And There Were Giants in the Land: The Life of William Heard Kilpatrick* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 258-259.

[15] Kilpatrick mentioned to W. B. Bizzell in his letter of May 22, 1926, (ECPF), " . . . recently one of the best known European professors of education visited me immediately upon arrival in this country. One of the definite things he had in mind was to get in touch with Dr. Collings and his work, as he had already in Geneva been studying his book."

[16] No collection at the University of Oklahoma, the most likely repository, contains any of Collings's personal papers. In fact, Collings Hall (the education building), a small plaque in it, and a personnel file in the provost's office are the major traces of his years at that institution. One of Knoll's sources for "Faking a Dissertation" (see Knoll's note 7, p. 218) confirmed that no personal papers were preserved.

proved to be a necessary first step toward understanding Collings better. These writings offer potential insights into his professional interests and provide hints about how this former student of Kilpatrick might have transplanted ideas from Teachers College into central Oklahoma.

Ellsworth Collings published at least six books on education with major companies, one chapter in a National Society for the Study of Education yearbook, and twenty-three articles on education subsequent to his 1923 *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*. Michael Knoll observed, "they contained little that was new and were, in fact, merely variations of the theses and themes that he had treated in his dissertation."[17] This assertion, likely true of many academics, is inarguable.

Collings's articles primarily addressed project teaching as a means of improving education for all students. This should not be surprising. The editors of the *Nebraska Educational Journal* noted in an introduction to one of his articles, "Dr. Ellsworth Collings . . . has probably done more actual work with the project method as advocated by Dr. Kilpatrick of Columbia University, than any other educator in the field."[18] Clearly, his career was highly dependent on the project method and his study under Kilpatrick. Likely, he viewed one of his responsibilities as a former student of Kilpatrick to be the further dissemination and implementation of his mentor's ideas. Collings, through the written word, advocated use of the project method to the widest audience possible. His articles appeared in such well-known journals as *Progressive Education*, *School Executives Magazine*, *Journal of Educational Sociology*, and *Clearing House* as well as more humble publications including *Oklahoma Teacher* and *Oklahoma Parent-*

[17] Knoll, p. 217.

Teacher that were more likely to come into the hands of classroom teachers and inspire changes in practice. Collings also addressed the need for improved supervision in rural schools as a means of spreading the progressive teaching reforms he advocated.[19] One way he fulfilled his public relations responsibilities as dean was through a series of articles for alumni and friends of the University of Oklahoma in *Sooner Magazine* and a *Curriculum Journal* article describing the academic strengths of the progressive University High School.[20] Collings did reiterate his major positions throughout his articles. Perhaps Knoll's speculation that "his real interest was no longer education" is correct.[21] Unfortunately, Knoll offered that possibility without evidence. An alternative explanation might very well lie in a devotion to seeing education improved through the project and activity curriculum, both probably ideas more frequently discussed than methods used with students in schools. Throughout Collings's articles, a steadfast faith in the engagement of students in purposeful activities, a belief in the dignity children possess and the respect they should accorded, and a hope that schools could be improved for all students remain visibly strong.[22] These themes also are present in the books he authored, the apparent sources of which may be his most important, yet overlooked, legacy.

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[18] Ellsworth Collings, "Planning School Work in Terms of Children's Activities," *Nebraska Educational Journal* 12 (January 1932): 20.

[19] Ellsworth Collings, "The Weak Spot in Rural Education," *AAUW Journal* 23 (April 1930): 134-136 and *Oklahoma Teacher* (May 1930): 11, 30-31.

[20] Ellsworth Collings, "College of Education," *Sooner Magazine* 2 (October 1929):6-7; Ellsworth Collings, "New Frontiers and New Frontiersmen in Education," *Sooner Magazine* 4 (December 1931): 84-85, 92-93; Ellsworth Collings, "Teacher Training Work Kept Up-to-Date," *Sooner Magazine* 11 (February 1938): 10-11, 28; Ellsworth Collings, "How an Activity High School Won the Respect of a Liberal Arts College," *Curriculum Journal* 7 (May 1936): 4-6.

[21] Knoll, p. 217.

[22] No attempt was made in this brief overview to analyze Collings's works on an item-by-item basis. Such an endeavor would be overly tedious for the format of this presentation and is properly reserved for a future publication.

Ellsworth Collings published at least six books on education following *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*. Knoll dismissed these later works as irrelevant and claimed, again without documentation, "He [Collings] himself accorded them little importance . . . ."[23] Yet, perhaps the purpose of these books was not to introduce new ideas but to carry existing ideas to broader audiences. Four of Collings's books published between 1927 and 1934 offered his particular version of child-centered progressivism to specific groups of educators. Taken as a whole, these works clearly appear to be more of a marketing ploy than an attempt to offer new ideas. Collings segmented his audience into school leaders,[24] elementary teachers,[25] and secondary teachers,[26] offering specialized books for educators with these particular interests. His more broadly oriented *Psychology for Teachers: Purposive Behavior, the Foundation of Learning* presented a generalized rationale for the specific activities and methods also suggested in the same volume.[27] Two excerpts from this volume supposedly of "little importance," "Planning Basic to Purposive Behavior" and "Studies of Children's Activities," were included in Caswell's and Campbell's classic and well-regarded *Readings in Curriculum Development*.[28]

Collings revisited his McDonald County, Missouri, experiences, first given national prominence in *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*, in his 1932 *The Community in the Making: An Experiment in Community Organization*. The latter

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[23] Knoll, p. 217.
[24] Ellsworth Collings, *School Supervision in Theory and Practice* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1927); Ellsworth Collings, *Supervisory Guidance of Teachers in Secondary Schools* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).
[25] Ellsworth Collings, *Project Teaching in Elementary Schools* (New York: The Century Co., 1928).
[26] Ellsworth Collings, *Progressive Teaching in Secondary Schools* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1931).
[27] Ellsworth Collings and Milbourne O. Wilson, *Psychology for Teachers: Purposive Behavior, the Foundation of Learning* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1930).

volume focused less on traditional schooling than did the former. Instead, he considered the community as a whole. As Collings wrote:

> This study embodies an effort to use the ideas implied in the concepts of modern education in mobilizing the forces of a rural community in an important endeavor. A rural worker interested in such an enterprise might quite normally inquire: (i) What should be its purpose? (ii) What is its most successful procedure? (iii) What outcomes might accrue from such an effort? Bob attempts to answer such inquiries from his friend Tom, in the study which follows.[29]

This book perhaps best illustrates Collings's repackaging of his previous work for new audiences. The hardships of the Great Depression impacted many of Oklahoma's rural agricultural communities with a special fury. Some of these communities, in fact, did not survive. The ideas suggested by Collings in *The Community in the Making* offered some citizens, unlikely to read *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum* or any other book on education, at least a glimmer of hope for improving the situation in which they found themselves.

The books on education written by Ellsworth Collings differed from most of those published by his mentor William Heard Kilpatrick, as well as many of the other, better-known authors on progressive education, in one significant way. Collings regularly addressed in great detail the mechanics of implementing in classrooms and schools the ideas he advocated. He discussed methods of curriculum development, classroom instruction, and student evaluation. He offered specific examples of how some teachers had engaged their own students in a variety of projects. For classroom teachers, overworked, underpaid, and with little time to translate the general and often theoretical

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[28] Hollis L. Caswell and Doak S. Campbell, *Readings in Curriculum Development* (New York: American Book Company, 1937), 360-362, 403-409.
[29] Ellsworth Collings, *The Community in the Making: An Experiment in Community Organization* (Oklahoma City: The Economy Co., 1932), 5.

prose of Dewey, Kilpatrick, and others into practical plans for their students, Collings's books might very well have offered more value. Providing theory as well as examples of and suggestions for practice, Collings took his version of child-centered progressive education from the halls of Teachers College to the classrooms of Oklahoma.

The genesis of Collings's books on supervision and elementary and secondary teaching can be found in four lesser-known publications from the years of 1925 to 1928. Although he appears never to have classified these works as "books" in his University of Oklahoma records, libraries today collect and classify them as books. Each of these volumes, *Creative Supervision: Parts I, II, and III* (1925), *A Conduct Scale for the Measurement of Teaching* (1926), *Project Teaching in Secondary Schools* (1928), and *A Syllabus in Project Teaching (Secondary Schools)* (1928) shares several characteristics with each of the others.[30] All consist of duplicated typewritten pages bound in paper covers by Edwards Brothers Publishers of Ann Arbor, Michigan. They are materials assertedly derived from practice and used by Collings in teaching his own classes at the University of Oklahoma. He wrote in the introduction to *Creative Supervision: Parts I, II, and III* that the ideas he presented there had been "experimentally tested over a period of years in the University Training School, University of Oklahoma . . . ."[31] *A Syllabus in Project Teaching (Secondary Schools)* likewise included "problems that have grown up

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[30] Ellsworth Collings, *Creative Supervision: Parts I, II, and III* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1925); Ellsworth Collings, *A Conduct Scale for the Measurement of Teaching* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1926); Ellsworth Collings, *Project Teaching in Secondary Schools* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1928); Ellsworth Collings, *A Syllabus in Project Teaching (Secondary Schools)* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1928). The table of contents for *Creative Supervision* indicates two additional parts, Part IV "Functional Diagnosis of Teaching" and Part V "Functional Prognosis of Teaching," not included in that volume. Whether or not those two parts were published remains undetermined. *A Syllabus in Project Teaching* is an abbreviated version of *Project Teaching in Secondary Schools*.

[31] Collings, *Creative Supervision*, p.iv.

in actual attempts to enable teachers to practice project teaching in high schools."[32] Collings's intent for these works transcended their use in his university courses for academic credit:

> This volume in addition to stimulating the growth of teachers, supervisors, principals, and superintendents on the job, will find ready use in stimulating discussion in college, normal school, and reading circle classes. I have found it invaluable in stimulating discussion in my own classes.[33]

These four publications ultimately grew into Collings's later books on education. Large parts of each appeared verbatim in his subsequent works. They also provide rare insights into some of the topics addressed in his classes, providing examples of how some educators encountered one version of child-centered progressive education from the former student of the man who popularized the project method.

Ellsworth Collings remains forever associated with *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*, an influential work regardless of its possibly problematic basis. Upon completion of his graduate studies at Teachers College, Collings embarked on a career of relative obscurity at a state-supported university in the middle of the country. Nevertheless, he continued addressing educational topics in writing. While none of his subsequent books or articles attained the prominence of *An Experiment With A Project Curriculum*, they demonstrated his continued commitment to spreading the ideas of his mentor, William Heard Kilpatrick. His most significant legacy, however, may emerge from his Edwards Brothers booklets of course materials. These seemingly inconsequential documents suggest several avenues for further study.

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[32] Collings, *A Syllabus in Project Teaching (Secondary Schools)*, unnumbered introduction.
[33] Collings, *Creative Supervision*, p. v.

Information from the University Training School at the University of Oklahoma as well as any preserved course materials from Collings's former students could offer new insights into the education of early to mid-20th century public school teachers and administrators as well as on some of the practices they employed. The ways in which theoretical suggestions from the halls of Teachers College and other institutions far from central Oklahoma were translated into what likely were more practical forms for a different population of students would be intriguing, especially since Collings's version of Teachers College ideas came not merely from reading or a single presentation but from working with that institution's prominent faculty members. His early works very well could improve contemporary understanding of Kilpatrick and others on the Teachers College faculty under whom Collings studied. Dissertations and theses completed under Collings's supervision could be a source of information about how his ideas and interests changed, if at all, over the course of his career.

Individuals such as Ellsworth Collings merit further study. Although not prominent like their mentors, they were vital links in the spread of significant educational ideas across the country from a relatively few elite institutions to virtually innumerable classroom teachers and local school administrators. Their role in this process remains unrecognized and poorly understood.

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